

Carol M. Strickland  
 First Presbyterian Church of Athens  
 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, July 31, 2016  
 Text: Matthew 6:9-15, Psalm 103:1-13

## Forgive Us Our Debts

### *Introduction to Scripture*

Our New Testament reading is the Lord's Prayer as Matthew gives it to us in the Sermon on the Mount, followed by two verses about forgiveness. Listen again for God's word:  
*Matthew 6:9-15.*

### *Sermon*

In our series on the Lord's Prayer we have now arrived at the line that causes great untidiness in ecumenical worship. The Presbyterians say "debts" and "debtors" while the Methodists and Episcopalians say "trespasses" and "those who trespass against us." Why the difference?

Those churches which say "trespasses" are descended from the Anglican tradition, and those with roots in the Reformed tradition say "debts." The apocryphal and certainly untrue explanation is that the former were filled with land-owning gentry for whom the greatest sin was trespassing, while the latter were filled with their poorer neighbors to the North, the Scots, who were ever fearful of being thrown into debtors' prison.

The real explanation is that when Thomas Cranmer penned the *Book of Common Prayer* for the Church of England, he followed Tyndale's translation of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew. The Scots, however, followed the wording of the King James Version. The King James Version and its children, the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), are a more accurate translation of the Greek. The Greek word Matthew used actually means "debts," i.e. financial obligations and by extension or metaphor, moral obligations. If Matthew had meant "trespasses," he would have used another Greek word which means exactly that which he did use just a few verses later, as we heard.

Interestingly, in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, he uses yet another Greek word which gets translated as simply "sins." It was originally a word used to describe when an arrow fails to meet its target. An image that comes to my mind is the 100,000 golf balls that annually are hit by professionals and amateurs alike in the lake that surrounds the 17<sup>th</sup> green at the PGA golf course in Ponte Vedra. Sin is missing the mark. But whether we say "debts," "trespasses," or "sins," we are talking about the same thing. We are talking about our failure to do what is right, our violation of God's laws, our crooked aim because something about us is out of whack.

It is the Bible's assumption that we all sin, that we all fall short of being the people God created us to be. We Presbyterians are reminded of this every week. We can't get very far in our worship without confessing our sin to God. I have heard even Presbyterian ministers comment that they think this emphasis on sin is too much, too gloomy. After all, most folks sitting in our pews are not egregious sinners—rapists, murderers, or compulsive liars. Maybe

not, but I daresay we are all guilty of that number one sin on the vice list: pride, or its flipside, false humility. Either we are self-righteous, believing we are better than others. Or we think we are not worthy of anything good, including the love of God. Yes, sin is universal. Even the saints in the Bible, Peter and Paul, for example, are not exempt. At bankruptcy court I'm told that before a case is heard, the bailiff cries out, "All debtors, rise!" That would be all of us. We all are all debtors, all trespassers, all sinners.

Yet, unbelievably, God forgives us. I say "unbelievably" with my tongue in my cheek because it is really hard for us to believe. "[God] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." (Psalm 103:10) We tend to think of life in terms of transactions. With God, we wrack up columns and columns of IOUs we could never repay. But God isn't about transactions. God doesn't wipe the slate clean. God throws the whole slate away! God is about relationship, not transactions. I like the way one hymn puts it, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." Think about that when you are at the beach and stare out at the ocean that stretches farther than the eye can see. That's how expansive God's mercy is. And mercy is the basis of God's relationship with us.

Once there was a priest who struggled with forgiveness. He lived in the Philippines. Years before, as a seminarian, this priest had committed a terrible sin he'd kept secret from everyone. Everyone, that is, except God. Time and again he tearfully confessed it to his Lord, but he never felt forgiven. It so happened that there was a woman in this priest's parish who had a reputation as a mystic. She claimed to have the ability to speak to Jesus in visions. The priest was skeptical. Thinking to expose her as a fraud, he said to her one day, "The next time you speak with Christ, do me a favor. Ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary."

The next time he saw the woman, the priest asked if she had talked with Christ. Yes, she had. "And did you ask him what sin I committed?"

"Yes, I asked him."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said, 'I don't remember.'"

We have a hard time believing that God really forgives us. Karl Menninger, of the Menninger Clinic, once said that if he could convince the patients in his psychiatric hospitals that their sins are forgiven, 75% of them could walk out the next day.<sup>1</sup>

We have a hard time grasping that God's love doesn't keep track of our misdeeds. It's extravagant love that forgives seventy times seven. It's the love of a Prodigal Father who puts aside all honor to hug the neck of his wayward child. It would be fitting for all of us to have the one-word epitaph that is on a tombstone in upstate New York: Forgiven. So in the Lord's Prayer we can ask God to "Forgive us our debts" confident that God has already hit the delete button on our sins.

But there's more to the picture and more to the Lord's Prayer than just "Forgive us our debts." There's the other part that says, "As we have forgiven our debtors." God forgives us but we need to forgive others. Well, that's great in theory, we say. It sounds wonderful from the pulpit, preacher, but just try to actually do it! It's hard. It's hard to let go of the injury done to us. It's hard to grant clemency to the person who betrayed us. It's unfair. It is downright unnatural.

After the bombing in Oklahoma City, there was a city-wide memorial service. Billy Graham spoke at the service. He said, "We are here with you to let the healing begin. We are

here to show you that a nation stands beside you in your grief. We are here to forgive.” I daresay there were few there that day who were there to forgive. The Attorney General was talking retribution; the president was promoting the death penalty. Dr. Graham was speaking out of the peculiarity of the Christian faith which teaches us to forgive.<sup>2</sup>

We need to forgive others: the child who disappointed us, the friend who deceived us, the colleague who stepped on our toes. We are not to be resentful against any group of people--a nation, a race, a social class, some religion or political party of which we disapprove. We are to forgive even our enemies--be they ISIS terrorists or sexual abusers. To forgive is not to forget. We should never forget the horrors of slavery or the holocaust. To forgive does not mean to excuse. Battered spouses should not go back to their abusers. Nor does it mean we must *like* the offender. But forgiving does mean letting go of the grudge, the anger, the hurt. It means having goodwill toward the perpetrator.

You see, not forgiving another person is like holding them in prison. Forgiving them is like opening the prison door. The big problem with keeping the one who hurt you imprisoned is that as the prison guard, you are effectually in prison, too. You are bound to the prisoner. You are attached by your resentment. Grudges are like that. They give the offending party power over you. But when you let go of the grudge, you set not only the other person free, but yourself as well.

I wish I could say that we never need forgiveness within the church, but I can't. The church can inflict wounds as deep as any. I recall reading an article by the vicar of a London church just a couple of years ago.<sup>3</sup> He went to visit an elderly lady. She had left the church when she was a young woman and wanted to come back. “What was it that led you away from the church for 75 years?” he asked her.

“I was young and in love. My fiancé and I went to the rector to get married. But he wouldn't marry us,” she replied.

“Why not?” asked the vicar. “Had you been married previously or perhaps were too young?”

“No,” she said calmly. “The rector looked at my hand. You see, I worked in a mill. I had an accident when I was 16.” She held up her left hand. The last three fingers were missing. “The rector said that since I didn't have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he couldn't marry us.”

Taken aback the vicar inquired, “May I ask what brings you back to church now?”

“God's bigger than the church,” she replied. “I'll be dead soon. The Lord's Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So that's what I've decided to do.”

That elderly lady understood that there's a connection between forgiving and being forgiven. Jesus told a parable along those lines.<sup>4</sup> A king reckons accounts with his slaves beginning with one who owes him a ridiculously large amount. Knowing the slave can never repay him, the king decides to cut his losses by selling the slave, his family and all his possessions. Whereupon the slave begs for mercy. Quite surprisingly, the king tears up the slave's IOU. Hardly off the hook for five minutes, the slave collars a fellow slave who owes him a pittance and demands he pay up. The fellow slave begs for mercy but gets none. When the king gets wind, he throws the ungrateful first slave in jail where he must stew for the rest of his life.

The point of the parable is the same point Jesus makes in the two verses that follow the Lord's Prayer in Matthew: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your

trespasses.” In other words, forgiving and being forgiven are related. You really can’t have one without the other. God lets us off the hook so we can let others off. God frees us so we can free them.

You’ve heard those remarkable stories of forgiveness— Amish families forgiving the shooting of schoolgirls ten years ago in Pennsylvania; family member of the nine black church members killed last year in Charleston forgiving the murderer. These stories make the news because they are so rare. A Dallas police officer speaking at the funeral of one of his fellow officers slain in the terrible ambush a couple of weeks ago, addressing particularly blacks who were there, said, “. . . We cannot allow tragedy to continue to bring us together. In order to forge a healthy relationship, forgiveness has to come first. . . . Forgiveness must come first for love to be established. . . . Please allow me to take that first step.”<sup>5</sup>

In our world today with so much violence, hatred, and prejudice among races, among religions, among religions, among fellow citizens and fellow human beings, God knows we need to learn how to forgive more than ever. The problems feel overwhelming. So as Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Begin with yourself. Begin by forgiving those *you* need to forgive.

In our forgiving and being forgiven, we are made part of God’s new age.<sup>6</sup> We participate in the great adventure called the kingdom of God. We are invited to throw a monkey’s wrench into the way the world ordinarily works. We are called to break the cycle of retribution and vengeance. Because God loves us so radically, we don’t have to silently lick our wounds and wait for the day when we can return the blow that was dealt to us. We can take charge and turn things around, be the victors rather than the victims. We can forgive. In the kingdom of God, sin doesn’t have the last word. Retaliation and resentment don’t have the final say. Jesus from the cross didn’t curse the friends who betrayed and abandoned him nor call down wrath on his executioners. In his dying breath he prayed, “Father, forgive them.” And God did, and God still does, and so should we.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Amen.

---

1. William Carl, *The Lord’s Prayer for Today*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006), p. 62.

2. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 85-86.

3. Samuel Wells, “What’s Really Killing the Church,” in *The Christian Century*, July 24, 2013, p. 31.

4. Matthew 18:23-35

5. The Dallas Morning News, “Dallas police officer who apologized to Black Lives Matter is shining example of humility,” by Destiny Herndon-De Las Rosa, 15 July 2016.

6. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.